

K–12 Quality and Testing

BACKGROUND

Article VIII, section 2, of the Michigan Constitution requires the legislature “to maintain and support a system of free public elementary and secondary schools as defined by law,” and many people see this as one of state government’s most important functions.

The state has become increasingly involved in overseeing the performance of K–12 students, particularly since the 1994 school finance reforms, which made the state the largest K–12 funding source. The state’s interest in education quality stems from the obvious need for a well-educated citizenry, a deep-held belief that a good education is essential to a person’s well-being, and a need to document the return on investment for state education dollars.

The state and the nation have struggled in recent years to find a fair, realistic, and accurate way to measure academic performance. This has proven to be no easy task. Some commonly used indicators of a school’s quality include its graduation rate, drop-out rate, and funding level. However, these indicators, while easily calculated, provide little information on classroom learning.

Standardized testing is becoming commonly used nationwide to quantify and compare academic outcomes across districts and time. Michigan uses such testing and has been administering its own standardized evaluation tool, the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) test, to students since the 1970s.

Measuring Quality

Michigan Education Assessment Program

Arguably, the most controversial test given in Michigan classrooms is the MEAP test, which is used by state educators to assess student performance. The tests are administered in five grades on various subjects.

Each year the state publishes the MEAP scores—the percentage of students in each school building and district in the state that scored at, above, or below state standards. The exhibit presents the grades and subjects tested and the statewide results for FY 2000–01.

Schools have a strong incentive to perform well on their MEAP tests because the scores are used in school accreditation, in giving school achievement awards (e.g., the “Golden Apple”), and in awarding college scholarships (the Merit awards) to individual students. MEAP scores are used by some parents in choosing the school district in which their child will be educated; this decision brings additional revenue to the district receiving the new pupil and costs revenue for the district losing him/her.

Federal Legislation: No Child Left Behind

Standardized testing is expected to increase nationwide in coming years due to enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Beginning in the 2005–06 school year, this act requires states, as a condition of receiving federal funding, to test all 3d–8th graders annually on reading and math. In Michigan this will increase standardized

GLOSSARY

Accreditation

Recognition that a school has met certain standards set by the State Board of Education and the legislature.

Core curriculum

A course of study followed by all students in a particular school district, state, or other area. Michigan schools are not required to teach a state-mandated core curriculum but may follow a model core curriculum recommended by the state.

Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP)

Mandatory statewide academic testing for 4th, 5th, 7th, 8th and 11th graders in such subjects as math, reading, writing, science, and social studies. The MEAP test is based on the subject matter in the model core curriculum.

Professional development

Ongoing teacher education and training.

MEAP Testing and Statewide Results, FY 2000-01

Grade Level	Subjects Tested	Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding State Standards
4	Reading	60%
	Math	72
5	Science	42
	Writing	61
	Social studies	19
7	Reading	58
	Math	68
8	Science	20
	Writing	67
	Social studies	30
11	Math	68
	Reading	74
	Science	60
	Writing	69
	Social studies	27

SOURCE: Michigan Department of Treasury, "Michigan Merit Award and MEAP Information."

testing substantially: Currently, in this age group, 3d and 6th graders are not MEAP tested at all and only 4th and 7th graders are tested in both reading and math.

Simply described, the new federal guidelines penalize subperforming districts that do not produce sufficient increases in test scores over time. After two years of no improvement, schools must permit parents to send their child to a different school and provide transportation to the new school. Also, for students attending persistently failing schools (that is, a school that has failed to improve sufficiently for three of four consecutive years), the local district must use part of its federal funding to pay for supplemental instruction, such as tutors, for its students. These stringent federal testing requirements are evidence that policymakers increasingly are relying on test scores to both evaluate and improve the nations' schools.

Accreditation

Accreditation, an evaluation system commonly used in higher education, recognizes whether a school has met certain standards set by the State Board of Education and the legislature. Public Act 25 of 1990 initiated the state accreditation program. Until very recently, MEAP test scores were the primary determining factor in whether a school achieved accreditation, but in response to objections by many to using this test as nearly the sole evalua-

tion tool, the State Board of Education developed a new accreditation system that uses additional measures as well.

Quality-Improvement Strategies

Potential strategies for improving education quality are nearly limitless. Some of the most common are briefly described here.

Early-Childhood Education

Support for early-childhood education (preschool) as a school-improvement strategy is growing. Currently, the Michigan School Readiness Program provides preschooling for approximately 26,000 four-year-olds thought to be at risk of future academic failure. This is a highly rated program, and studies (e.g., by the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation) show that children who have good early education perform better in school than do children with similar backgrounds who have not.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement—e.g., requiring homework to be finished on time, attending parent-teacher conferences—is found to be a positive influence on student achievement. Michigan recently attempted to increase parent involvement in education: P.A. 29 of 2001 requires the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) to develop a model voluntary contract that schools may use to encourage parents to be more involved in their children's education.

Professional Development

Professional development involves improving education through improving the knowledge, skills, and abilities of teachers and other school professional staff. All Michigan school districts are required to provide at least five days annually of professional development.

Schools of Choice and/or Charter Schools

In Michigan, parents may choose to send their child to a public school other than the one assigned by the child's school district. Michigan has relatively progressive alternative-schooling laws, allowing charter schools, home schooling, and school choice across district lines.

State Takeover

If the legislature and governor believe it necessary, legislation may be enacted permitting the state to take control of a school district in order to improve its performance. In Michigan, the state has taken over the Detroit school district—the state's largest—and appointed a so-called reform board to replace the local school board.

Statewide Core Curriculum

Some states mandate that schools statewide teach a "core" curriculum—a standardized course of study. Michigan has

a *model* core curriculum that schools may use or not, as they choose.

Technical Assistance

Technical assistance involves experts assisting struggling districts in identifying and implementing specific actions to improve education quality. Michigan offers some limited technical assistance to schools exhibiting difficulty in obtaining accreditation.

DISCUSSION

Standardized Testing

There is strong disagreement about whether standardized tests measure academic achievement or simply test-taking skills. Opponents say that using standardized test scores to compare one school or district to another excludes such critical factors as parent involvement, student mobility, cultural differences, and socioeconomic status. Some go so far as to argue that the test is a better measure of family income than it is of a school's ability to teach, because academic performance and income are highly correlated. Test scores are not adjusted to reflect differences in family income or other factors, and critics contend that this results in schools being unfairly judged or stigmatized for matters beyond their control.

Others object to the increasing amount of time that students spend preparing for and taking standardized tests. They argue that teachers are forced to “teach to the test” or to prepare students by teaching lessons for the sole purpose of helping them to test well. They point out that standardized tests, unlike tests normally given in the classroom to assess performance, are not used to provide feedback to students to improve their performance—in fact, students typically never find out how they did on specific test questions.

Standardized-test supporters argue that taxpayers pay billions of dollars annually for public schools and have a right to hold schools accountable—something they feel is not possible absent standardized tests. Members of the business community and others argue that classroom grade-point averages cannot be used to compare schools, since an “A” in one district (or building or classroom) does not necessarily have the same meaning as an “A” in another. Giving the same test to all students, they assert, is the only way to get an accurate comparison of student performance. They argue that in the absence of such tests, parents, employers, and colleges would have no objective data to tell them whether students in one district are better or more poorly prepared for the future than are students elsewhere. Not only are these tests necessary to compare

schools, but they also are needed to track the performance of schools over time.

Most supporters of standardized tests have no objection to “teaching to the test.” On the contrary, they assert that this is one of the objectives of giving such a test. The MEAP test, for example, is designed to test knowledge of subject matter covered in the state's model core curriculum, one that supporters believe is based on high standards. If, in giving the MEAP test, schools are forced to teach to these high standards, students stand only to gain. Thus, MEAP supporters say, standardized tests not only measure student success but also contribute to it.

Accreditation

The state superintendent of education recently announced a new accreditation system for Michigan schools (Education YES!) that relies less on MEAP scores than did the earlier system. Under Education YES!, each school building will receive an overall letter grade plus additional letter grades for six specific indicators, three that pertain to the MEAP test and three that do not. The overall grade will be based primarily on MEAP test scores, which will comprise about two-thirds (67 percent) of the score. The remaining third will be based on other indicators, such as teacher quality and professional development. The superintendent has created an Accreditation Advisory Committee to develop the details of the accreditation plan and says that schools may expect to receive their first accreditation report in December 2002. The House and Senate must approve the new system, although some policymakers believe that the superintendent has the legal authority to implement the plan regardless of legislative action (this issue is unresolved at this writing).

Education YES! is receiving some positive reaction because it relies on factors in addition to MEAP scores. Some object to the use of letter grades at all, stating that disadvantaged schools are at risk of being unfairly branded with low grades. Many school-reform proponents object to any reduced reliance on test scores, arguing that assessment could become too “soft” to be a useful evaluative tool or school-improvement incentive. Others point to the strict new federal assessment requirements and contend that the state accreditation system should be aligned with the federal requirements.

Other Quality Issues

State Takeover of Poorly Performing Districts

In 1999 a law was enacted directing the state to take over the Detroit school district, which prompted intense opposition from many Detroit lawmakers, residents, and others. The elected school board was disbanded and a new, state-appointed board (the reform board) took the helm.

The board hired a new superintendent, who is making administrative and other changes throughout the district. In 2004 Detroit residents will be allowed to vote on whether to keep the reform board or again elect a local board. While Detroit currently is the only takeover district in Michigan, others, including Benton Harbor, had been under takeover consideration, and the issue is likely to resurface.

Takeover proponents argue that in poorly performing school districts, state trustees can break through the “usual way of doing business” and force change. They assert that it is a district’s students who really suffer when a district is not performing well, and the state has a responsibility to step in when school districts fail their students. Opponents decry the loss of local control and suggest that more state support, such as financial and technical assistance, would be as or more effective in bringing about change than a state takeover.

Core Curriculum

Supporters of state-mandated basic curriculum contend that it is the only way to ensure that students across the state graduate with the same essential skills. Opponents argue that such a mandate would interfere with one of the most dearly held aspects of the Michigan public school system: local control. Supporters of statewide adherence to a core curriculum point out that local districts still would be free to decide how to teach the core courses and also to offer supplemental studies.

See also Children’s Early Education and Care; K-12 Funding; K-12 Schooling Alternatives.

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